

ISRAEL'S GREAT FOREIGN POLICY DEBATE

The Crisis Mood Continues

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UNNOTICED by an outside world very much preoccupied in other quarters, a foreign policy debate of unusual scope has been under way for some months now in Israel. It has involved a tremendous amount of discussion, both vocal and printed—and perhaps even some thinking. This debate is not directly connected with any specific current event or development; foreign affairs have certainly not played a major role in the Histadrut and Knesset election campaigns. But perhaps “debate” is not the right word since what is taking place is more like a series of uncoordinated monologues.

No important idea or argument has emerged in the course of all this discussion that was not heard as long as a year or two ago. One is reminded of the China debate in the United States in which it came to be assumed that the changes in the Far East since the Second World War were for the most part, if not exclusively, the consequence of the acts of certain American statesmen, and not due to factors over which the West had little control. In Israel the deterioration of the country's position in foreign affairs over the last five or six years is in a similar

way attributed solely to the fact that somebody high up bungled matters. I do not know about China, but such an assumption is surely wrong so far as Israel is concerned.

Indeed, the supposition that Israel's foreign situation has greatly deteriorated is itself open to question. The current pessimism seems as exaggerated as was the confidence in 1947-48 in continued international support for Israel. It is an unfortunate tendency in Israeli political thinking to shuttle between Seventh Heaven and bleak despair; eight years of statehood have not sufficed to promote a temperate, balanced view of things. But the great political debate now raging in the country, however incorrect most of its assumptions, analyses, and conclusions may be, is a *fact*. Several different main lines of argument have emerged in it and it is the purpose of this article to describe and explain them.

THE first line, which urges *rapprochement* with the “camp of socialism, progress, and peace,” is certainly not a new one. Its proponents are, of course, the Communists, Mapam to a large extent; and to a lesser extent Ahdut Avoda. The details of rhetoric do not differ greatly from those used in Paraguay or Celebes, and need not be repeated here. Those who support this line labor under great difficulties. Communism in Israel calls for peace with the Arabs and for acceptance of the Arab League's demands for frontier changes that would require Israel to give up something like more than half her present territory. The Communist parties in the Arab countries have come out strongly for the Egyptian-Saudian-Syrian military alliance with its avowed anti-Israeli character. At the same time the Partisans of Peace, at their recent April meeting in New Delhi,

IS ISRAELI public opinion over-preoccupied with her foreign policy? This is the fundamental question that WALTER ZE'EV LAQUEUR tries to answer; the results of the recent Knesset elections take nothing away from the pertinence of his observations. Mr. Laqueur was until lately political commentator for the Israeli radio station. He was born in Breslau, Germany, in 1921, and came to Palestine in 1938. He has written for numerous periodicals in the United States and elsewhere, and a book by him, *Nationalism and Communism in the Middle East*, is to be published shortly in this country. At present Mr. Laqueur is on a prolonged visit to England.

denounced the "aggressive ruling circles in Israel" while finding no aggressiveness whatsoever in Cairo, Damascus, or Ryad. Chou En-lai, the Chinese prime minister, saw fit during the Bandung Conference to receive the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem and promise him his full support. In the UN Security Council, the Soviet attitude to such issues as free Israeli access to the Suez Canal or the Lake Huleh project development has been unfriendly if not downright hostile. All this—and the list could be lengthened—makes it rather difficult to call for an "Eastern orientation" in Israel these days.

More plausible and more influential is the neutralist line in Israel. It is the one taken by Ahdut Avoda and occasionally favored in *Zmanim*, the organ of the Progressives (a good bourgeois party despite its name). But neutralists can be found in many other parties, too, and perhaps even in some official quarters. Neutralism certainly does not mean anti-Westernism in this context. On the contrary, it is argued that Israeli relations with the West will be improved by a neutralist policy. Israel sought an alliance with the West—so the argument runs—but was cold-shouldered, while the Arabs' neutralist line has paid handsome dividends. Aren't the conclusions obvious? The Western orientation has brought a long succession of diplomatic rebuffs, together with isolation and insecurity, and it might eventually make Israel the victim of a Middle Eastern Munich; anything would be better than that. So the neutralists argue.

The "Asian orientation" that is advanced against Israel's Western alignment, though frequently but not always coupled with neutralism, of which it is a kind of variant, is not so easy to defend nowadays. Yet it is comprised of some sound ideas that serve as a healthy corrective to certain parochial tendencies in Zionism. It is often forgotten that the first and second generations of Zionist leaders were preoccupied with Western Europe and the United States; for many of them the Arabs hardly existed, and the Far East not at all. Since then China, India, and other Asian countries have emerged as ac-

tive and important forces in world affairs.

Little understanding and even less support for Israel is found in the Orient, as the Bandung Conference showed. But there is a good reason for this. Whatever good will Israel does have in the West is the result of many years of intensive effort; such an effort has not been made in the non-Arab East, which rests in its original ignorance of things Jewish. After the founding of Israel, a number of consulates were opened in Asia: it is clear that something on a much larger scale is needed to present Israel's case.

IF THE advocates of the "Asian Orientation" went no further than to make this point, there would be no quarrel with them. But many of them do not stop there, but go on to proclaim, in sweeping and very muddled terms, the advantages of an alliance with the new Asia. Israel, they say, is a part of Asia geographically, and must find her way into the family of Asian nations. What is forgotten is that Jerusalem is at least three times as far from Bandung as from Rome or Paris. And what is even more important, the fact that there is no more one big, happy Asian family than there is "One World"—or "One Europe"—is disregarded. When pressed, the "Asia-Firsters" in Israel are ready to exclude Communist China, North Korea, and Viet Minh from their list, the likelihood of an Israeli *rapprochement* with these countries obviously being very dim. Still, they argue that the establishment of normal relations with these countries would do no harm. They are ready, or readier, to loosen connections with pro-Western nations of Asia like Thailand and the Philippines with whom Israel already has relations but whose role in world affairs is limited.

Then you have the Colombo powers. Among these, Indonesia and Pakistan are decidedly unfriendly to Israel because of their Moslem affiliations and alignments (plus the strong Communist influence in the former country); this means there is little hope for improvement of relations in that direction. And it also means that, in the last resort, "Asia" boils down, for the "Asia-Firsters,"

to India, Ceylon, and Burma. Relations with Burma are good, those with India and Ceylon normal, yet Nehru has repeatedly postponed the exchange of diplomatic envoys between India and Israel.

But on what could closer relations between India and Israel be based? India needs the Arab countries as a counterweight to Pakistan's alignment with the West. Nor are India, Burma, and Ceylon complementary to Israel's economy. Trade agreements are desirable but inevitably artificial in a situation in which to a large extent they serve purely political rather than economic ends. It may be fascinating to find parallels between the development of Jewish tradition and the classical culture of the peoples of the Far East, but it is an open question whether these traditions have much of an impact on present-day life either in Israel or the Far East, and whether they have any bearing at all on contemporary politics. All this would go to show that the "Asian orientation" simply cannot stand up under close scrutiny; however sound some of its ideas, these are not enough to make it a viable alternative to Israel's present foreign policy.

A THIRD line of argument is hardly more serious. Aired occasionally in the General Zionists' *Haboker*, it holds that Israel should have adhered more closely to the West; she should have established diplomatic relations with Spain; she should not have voted in favor of Libyan statehood; Mr. David Hacohen, the Israeli ambassador to Burma, should not have given an interview favorable to Communist China upon his return from a visit to Peking earlier this year—and so on. During the last couple of years or so, those who voice such criticism have been able to offer a half dozen examples of what should and what should not have been done, and occasionally they may even have been right. But all this concerns very minor issues, explains nothing that happened in the past, and does not indicate an alternative for the future.

A variant school of thought, whose organ is *Ha'aretz*, is perhaps more deserving of

consideration. This views the deterioration in Israel's international position as a concomitant of "activist policy"—i.e. the acts of retaliation from Kibya to Gaza. One may agree that such acts of retaliation are not only blameworthy, but frequently ineffectual to boot, but without arriving at the same conclusions. Even had Israeli soldiers never returned the fire from across the borders and never counter-attacked, Arab propaganda would still have branded Israel as the "aggressor," and since that propaganda issues from four or five capitals, and the Israeli case from only one, and since the United Nations investigation teams have to remain "neutral" in order to keep going, world opinion would still have given Israel an equal share—if not more—of the blame for the border clashes. This may sound cynical, but it is the view of most people in Israel; all the evidence (above all, the wooing of the Arab governments by both West and East, as so frequently demonstrated in the Security Council) seems to indicate that it is fairly close to reality.

The last line of argument in the foreign policy debate in Israel maintains that the Israeli information services have failed and that, generally speaking, Israel's Foreign Ministry has not been equal to its task. This criticism cuts across party lines and is perhaps most frequently voiced in the General Zionist and Mizrahi newspapers. It is quite true that when the Israeli Foreign Ministry was established in 1948 it was largely a stop-gap affair. People were sometimes taken into it by mere accident, and stayed there thanks to bureaucratic inertia. But on the whole there is no reason to assume that Israel's Foreign Ministry is better or worse than similar institutions in other countries. The Israeli information services have suffered from a serious lack of coordination on the highest levels, but some slight progress appears to have been made of late. (It is quite impossible to treat this problem at length within the scope of the present article.) Even so, the general assumption that diplomats and, more specifically, propagandists—for the main criticism is directed against

the latter—can change basic political facts seems to me to be a gross exaggeration, to say the very least. Opposition to Israel in the United States, for instance, may at times be due to lack of information, but the American opponents of Israel who really matter surely do not lack for information about her. The existence of Israel works against their specific interests, and no amount of skillful propaganda can change that. The progressive disintegration of the Arab world, the loss of oil fields, pipe lines, or bases might convince them, but not propaganda. Successful propaganda could probably attenuate the existing anti-Israel trend, but certainly could not overcome it.

Such, then, are the arguments most frequently heard in the Israeli foreign policy debate. More eccentric views than these are voiced, but do not merit attention. The important question is, of course, the degree to which these symptoms and reactions reflect the true picture.

ANY proper survey of Israel's foreign affairs begins and ends with her relations with the Arab countries. All observers agree that these relations may persist for many years to come in their present negative state, with or without a "second round." Peace was possible in 1948-49, but the opportunity was let slip, mainly, it would appear, through the fault of the West. At present the Arab governments are only willing to make peace, if at all, on the terms of the 1947 UN resolution, which they themselves nullified by their invasion of Palestine. Complaints heard from time to time in the Israeli press to the effect that the West (meaning the U.S.) should, and could, somehow compel the Arab rulers to agree to peace by exerting pressure in the Arab capitals appear very naive. Equally naive, in this writer's opinion, is the idea that making Israel and the Arabs collaborate on some development project (e.g. the Johnston plan), however worthwhile such projects may be in and of themselves, can be a way of eventually achieving peace. This could never work in the framework of Middle Eastern realities, where

politics comes first; Arab-Israeli relations form an issue that can be solved only on the political (or political *cum* military) level.

And yet there is some ground for a very guarded optimism. At this point I must myself leave the realm of political facts, although reluctantly. There are signs, few and far between, that, first, the Arab rulers and large sections of the politically conscious and active public in the Arab countries have got used to the idea of the existence of a Jewish state (though not as yet to its present borders); and, second, that the Palestine question, which has overshadowed all other political issues in recent years in the Middle East, is increasingly being relegated to a secondary place. This does not mean that the Arabs have given up altogether the idea of a solution by force, or that the West may not indeed precipitate a new war by destroying the present balance of power in the Middle East.

Such a war, whatever its outcome, would almost certainly result in the emergence of one or two "popular democracies" in Middle Eastern style. It may be true, moreover, that one or two Arab governments are toying with the idea of a "Middle Eastern Munich," as some of the more excitable Israeli observers call it—that is, the amputation from Israel of the Negev and perhaps other territories. But whereas Hitler could take what he wanted because he had the superior military strength to do it, the Arab governments, unable to do the threatening themselves, would have to rely on the help of the Western powers to get them what they want. Advocates of such a "Munich" may be found in the capitals of the West, but the Arabs cannot really expect more than platonic support. This means that they have to continue to rely on economic and political boycotting, which, though costly and irritating to Israel, will not do her any permanent harm. This the Arabs are slowly beginning to realize. Were it not for the refugee problem, a reconciliation would appear to be a probability today, albeit a distant one.

Even if Israel did not exist, something like it would have had to be invented in

order to draw off some of the Arab steam. Arab statesmen will continue to argue that "Israel is the main danger," but many signs have appeared by now that they do not really believe it any longer. The Iraqi-Egyptian rift, and in general the Middle East's preoccupation with intra-Arab affairs, are such signs. All this suggests that the present "co-existence" in the Middle East will be replaced by something more lasting. Indeed, the chances for such a development in the Middle East are greater perhaps than in the world at large. The passage of time alone may do much to bridge over the present gap between Israel and the Arab countries. This, admittedly, is not the only eventuality one can foresee—it is not hard to imagine less agreeable ones; but in spite of all the heat it generates, the Israeli-Arab dispute does seem easier to resolve than those larger, deeper-going conflicts and oppositions which take the whole world for their stage.

ISRAELI relations with the Communist East have become normal again; in fact, they have improved considerably by comparison with Stalin's last days. Yet Russia has frequently supported Arab against Israeli interests, both in the Security Council and elsewhere. This has been quite evident with regard to the present Syrian government, which is neutralist and largely influenced by the local Communist party, and to a lesser degree with regard to Egypt. From Moscow's point of view, such policy makes sense. A country like Syria offers very tangible prospects (more, in fact, than mere prospects) for Communism in the Middle East. Israel, on the other hand, is very nearly a hopeless case in this respect. The local Communists have perhaps made some headway in the *ma'abarot*, among the more backward of the new immigrants, who are not yet firmly rooted in the country. But what can one hope for from a "proletarian mass party" that, after thirty-five years of existence, still gets less than 5 per cent of the votes in trade union elections (as compared with 7 per cent in the first Histadrut elections back in 1920). Therefore it is only natural

that Moscow should curry the more promising favor of the Arabs. Nonetheless, there is no danger, from Israel's point of view, that the Kremlin will go all out in backing the Arab countries against her. Soviet policy has shown itself fully aware both of the real relations of strength in the Middle East, and of the importance of Jewish public opinion in Western Europe, America, and, *mirabile dictu*, even at home. There has been a project in the offing to revive somehow or other the anti-fascist Jewish Committee of 1941-48 vintage, and West-East Jewish conferences are going to be staged; all this presupposes some sort of neutral attitude in the dispute between Israel and the Arab states.

For the rest, there have been a number of minor incidents that tend to show that there has been no basic change in the Soviet attitude. In cultural relations, Moscow has steadfastly opposed the principle of reciprocity. Israel has been faced with practical ultimatums in order to make her receive Soviet cultural missions which participate in local Communist rallies so partisan in character that they are boycotted even by Mapam fellow-travelers. Two Israeli writers were permitted to visit the Soviet Union, but the reports written subsequently by one of them, Haim Shorer, editor of *Davar*, the Histadrut daily, were bitterly resented by his hosts. The other writer, Leah Goldberg, a literary figure and lifelong Mapam sympathizer, went to Russia as the member of the Democratic Women's Delegation (which was completely Communist-dominated), against the advice of Mapam, which is second to none in its enthusiasm for the USSR. On her return, Miss Goldberg published a very favorable account of her experiences in Russia, but she was tactless enough to remark that the simple and practical Stockholm subway had impressed her more than the florid architecture of the Moscow one. This was enough to make her the target of violent attack ("Objective Poison" was one of the headlines in the Tel Aviv Communist daily *Kol Ha'am*), which indicated how little things had really

changed. There were more such straws in the wind. The new Israeli envoy to Moscow, Brigadier Yosef Avidar, was attacked in *Kol Ha'am* before he had arrived at the Soviet capital; it is most unlikely that the paper's editors would have dared to do this on their own initiative. *Pravda* complained about the amnesty granted this summer to a group of youngsters in Israel who had been convicted in 1953 of terrorist acts against the state (being suspected, among other things, of trying to blow up the Soviet Embassy in Tel Aviv at the time of the Moscow "doctors' plot"). The Israeli Foreign Ministry in each of these instances tried very hard to explain its case to Moscow, and the faintly apologetic tone it sounded was hardly helpful. After the amnesty, the Israeli envoy in Moscow went to the Soviet Foreign Ministry in order to "clarify" matters—but the Soviet foreign minister had not found it necessary to consult Israel about the release of Nazi war criminals imprisoned by the Russians. Foreign Minister Sharett had stressed in a letter to Molotov back in June 1953, when diplomatic ties between Israel and the USSR were reestablished, that Israel would not adhere to any "aggressive anti-Soviet bloc." No such assurance has been given by the Soviet Union on its side. Nevertheless, Israeli-Russian relations were and have remained normal. Several dozen Soviet citizens (most of them over sixty years of age, coming from the Czernovitz-Kishinev area) have been permitted to join close relatives in Israel. This, after the total cessation of immigration from Red Europe between 1937 and 1953, received much attention in Israel, and was regarded in some quarters as a new and important departure. But only if this dribble becomes a stream will it deserve to be considered a major political factor in Israeli-Russian relations.

RELATIONS with the satellites have been much the same except, perhaps, for Czechoslovakia, which has refused to this day to release the Mapam member Mordecai Oren, of Prague trial fame, who was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment in

October 1953. Yet last autumn Czechoslovakia freed another Israeli citizen, M. Orenstein, who likewise had appeared as a "witness" at the Prague trial and had been given a life sentence. Some of the satellite countries have gone to great lengths to revive their "friendship leagues" in Israel, inviting Israeli artists, musicians, athletes, and even an occasional journalist to visit them. Though Communist leaders in Eastern Europe openly admitted in talks with visitors that their attitude towards Israel, Zionism, and emigration had not changed, a number of gestures of good will were made, such as the liberation of some—but not all—of the Jewish leaders who had been jailed in Rumania, and the release of some arrested employees of the Israeli legations in Warsaw and Budapest. At the same time aged people with close relatives in Israel were permitted to emigrate.

All in all, 68 immigrants have entered Israel from the Soviet Union, and 182 from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary since the beginning of 1954. A fairly representative Israeli official delegation visited Communist China early this year. Some of its members appear to have accepted the Chinese sales talk without the required reservations, and on their return spoke in glowing terms of the vast prospects for Israeli exports to China. Since then, however, nothing more has happened, but through no fault of Israel. Hardly anybody there would object to doubling exports—and in any case strategically important goods are not involved.

NO NEW important developments have taken place in Israel's relations with the West for some time now. The old dilemmas persist, and some have become even more acute. Perhaps Washington and also London now understand better than before that Israel has real cause to feel concerned about Western policy in the Middle East, in view of the absence of any solid guarantees that the arms provided the Arab states will not be used against Israel—and, what is worse, in view of the refusal to supply similar arms to Israel.

The conviction is gaining ground that something must be done to obtain such guarantees for Israel—and not only on paper—but no tangible proposals have yet emerged. A reported British plan for Israel to cede part of the Negev to Jordan, and receive part of the "Triangle" in return, still remains a very shadowy thing. This would join Jordan to Egypt by land and rid the former of some of its contumacious Palestinian Arabs. Similar plans, more precise and more official, may be in the offing, but there have been so many plans and projects involving Palestine and Israel during the last thirty years that people have grown wary about taking them seriously. In the end, it has always worked out differently, and never in accordance with the blueprints.

All in all, the realization is slowly gaining ground that it is no use bemoaning the happy days of 1948. The international power relations that then favored Israel were a piece of luck, a temporary conjunction of circumstances that for many reasons could not last. It avails little to lament Israel's present isolation, and no panacea for it exists. Isolation in itself is not fatal; what is dangerous

is its psychological effect on people, who might lose their nerve and demand a showdown or an abrupt and radical reorientation of policy. This is one of the symptoms of claustrophobia. No decision can be forced, and Israelis have almost as much to fear from alarmist speeches and editorials as from external threats.

Too many people in Israel have worried for too long about foreign policy, whose primacy may be appropriate in the affairs of a great power; in a small country, however, such obsessive preoccupation with external politics can only do harm. Just now attention to more urgent domestic affairs would have a salutary effect. Since the possibilities of Israeli foreign policy are very limited anyway, there is little to lose in averting attention from it. Domestic development may not be the road to glory, but there is very little glory to be won in any case in the world of the 1950's. One day the citizens of Israel may be able modestly to echo Abbé Sieyès who after the French Revolution, the Consulate, and the Empire, in answer to the question, "And what did you do all those years?" said, "Well, sir, I lived."